



Dear Parish Family,

John Gibson, a television newscaster, has recently written a book entitled *War on Christmas*. Wal Mart has been criticized for insisting that its employees say to customers “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas”. In some places, Christmas displays have been prohibited on government property. Is there a campaign in the public square against Christmas?

To answer this question we must look at Christianity’s role in the public square. Years ago, Richard John Neuhaus, once a Lutheran pastor, now a Roman Catholic priest, wrote a fine book on this issue, *The Naked Public Square*, and has devoted himself over the years to the subject in his journal *First Things*. Neuhaus observed that pressure does exist in American society to keep religion out of the public arena. While the Constitution forbids the establishment of an official religion by the state, Christians are allowed to exercise their faith in the public space. What complicates the issue is the place religion has in governmental institutions like schools. May a public school put up a Christmas tree or creche? The law actually allows for such decorations as long as they are displayed for a short period of time for instructional purposes. May religion be studied in the public schools? Of course.

The Christian Church is a public Church. Our worship is public. Anyone may attend worship. Our evangelism is public. We may witness to others, advertise in the newspaper, put up signs, even hold religious processions and marches outside (possibly in some cases needing a permit), pass out literature. Christians have every right to debate public issues on the basis of their Christian faith, although some people, apparently, do not believe that religious arguments should be used. At times, the Church makes statements about governmental policy. We are indeed a public Church, which has a Constitutional right to public space. We are not intramural, completely enclosed behind the walls of our buildings. In the Roman Empire before the legalization of Christianity, the Church was prohibited from the public space except when the faithful were martyred in the public arena. We live in the United States, where free exercise is protected. We shall be a public Church, despite those who would have it otherwise.

The celebration of Christmas is an aspect of the public square battle. Students in public schools may study the meaning of Christmas. It is uncertain whether Christmas displays may be on public property. The battle goes on here, as it does in the schools. But, Christian displays may be placed on non-governmental property and are found at thousands of homes and on other sites.

What should we do about saying “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Christmas”? The retailers who tell their employees to say “Happy Holidays” have their reasons, good and bad. Let them go about their business. But, when a clerk says “Happy Holidays”, you are not prevented from responding, “Merry

Christmas” Let us do this simple thing. It is appropriate. (Make no mistake, most of the holiday spending is Christmas spending). Make your witness.

Also remember that important distinctions should be made about Christmas. The Church adapted an old pagan holiday in order to pre-empt it. For the faithful, the paganism is pre-empted. For us the worship of the Triune God and particularly Christ is central to the season. Many practices of the season are not of Christian origin but come from an old solstice holiday. Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the reindeer, though lots of fun, are definitely not Christian symbols and should never be confused with the Christian observance of Christmas. Institutions in the public space often confuse the pagan and Christian holidays. This fact is a result of the Christian pre-emption of an old pagan holiday. The Church itself should never fall into such confusion.

Is there a war on Christmas? In some quarters there is. What should we do in our witness during Advent and Christmas? Here are some suggestions.

Wish people a Merry Christmas. If a person says he/she is Jewish, wish the individual a Happy Hanukkah. If Muslim say, “God bless you.” If a person says he/she is an atheist, say, “Sorry, I didn’t know”

- Decorate the outside of your home with Christian symbols.
- Invite people who have no Church to Advent and Christmas services.
- Keep Christmas Christ centered.
- Give to the poor.
- Wear Christian symbols.
- When in conversation about your faith, be respectful of the other and be a strong witness to the Lord.
- If an issue exists in the community about the public practice of Christian faith, participate in the debate and urge others to protect the free exercise of religion.

Happy Holidays,

Oops. Rather.

Have a hopeful Advent and Merry Christmas.

In Christ,  
Pastor Mike & Pastor Mandy